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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CHIANG MAI 000073

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TAGS: [SENV](#) [ECON](#) [EAGR](#) [CH](#) [LA](#) [BM](#) [TH](#)
SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT MUM ON ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS DURING BURNING
SEASON

REF: A. CHIANG MAI 38 (DOCTORS ON AIR POLLUTION)
[1](#)B. 08 CHIANG MAI 50 (HAZARDOUS AIR QUALITY)
[1](#)C. 08 CHIANG MAI 91 (REDUCED BURNING)

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Summary and Comment

[1](#)1. (U) Despite seasonal air pollution in northern Thailand reaching hazardous levels well above last year's, local Thai government bodies remained quiet, issuing no public announcements during the peak periods of the burning season. The highest daily PM10 measurements for the burning season (February to April) reached a level nearly double that determined safe by the U.S. EPA, while PM2.5 measurements, which gauge the smaller, more hazardous particulate matter in the air, reached levels more than triple what the EPA considers safe. Despite the dangerous northern Thai air in the first quarter of the year, local government agencies avoided any enforcement of anti-burn laws and refrained from clear public warnings against hazardous air quality.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Comment: After years of pressure from the Chiang Mai academic and medical communities to enforce anti-burn laws, local law enforcement agencies remain unwilling to take widespread action, often defending their lethargy on the grounds that burning is a way of life for local farmers. At the same time, farmers continue to complain that alternative grazing methods, such as plowing, are too costly. For farmers, therefore, the decision not to burn their crop fields is an economic one. If local government is incapable of enforcing anti-burning, subsidizing alternative methods would be the best bet. But such a costly program is unlikely to come to fruition; thus it is probable that the seasonal air pollution of northern Thailand will be a problem for years to come. End Summary and Comment.

Seasonal Pollution Exceeds Hazard Thresholds

13. (U) An overall review of 2009 pollution indicators for the annual burning season in northern Thailand (as well as in Burma, Laos, and southern China) shows that the population faced higher levels of more hazardous air quality for longer periods of time than compared to last year. From February through March, the number of days that PM10, a measure of particulate matter smaller than ten micrograms per cubic meter (mg/cm), exceeded the EPA's safety standard of 150 mg/cm was 20, compared to only six days last year. March was the most polluted month by PM10 measurements, which are taken daily, peaking at 238 mg/cm, compared to the 206 mg/cm peak last year. (Note: Ref A provides more details on the PM10 measurements during the 2009 burning season. Three monitoring centers in and around Chiang Mai collect PM10 data daily, and daily averages are posted on a public website.)

Government Keeps Close Hold on Hazardous Measurements

14. (SBU) The RTG's Department of Pollution of Control (DPC) also collects but does not publicize PM2.5 measurements, which, according to the U.S. EPA, are better indicators of truly hazardous particulate matter since such matter smaller than 2.5 mg/cm can penetrate the lungs and have long-term health consequences. The DPC measured PM2.5 on a monthly basis, taking two random days' measurements from each month, then computing the PM2.5 level for those two days only. Although this data is not released to the public, post requested that the DPC provide the data to us.

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15. (SBU) The DPC's PM2.5 measurements indicate that air pollution reached levels above the U.S. EPA's safety standard of 35 mg/cm on several occasions during the burning season. March was the worst month, recording a peak PM2.5 reading of 126 mg/cm, over three times as high as the EPA safety standard. January and February measurements were both above the EPA safety standard as well, reaching 50 and 114 mg/cm, respectively. In April, the PM2.5 peak reached 75 mg/cm. The DPC told us that the reason it is not permitted to release this data to the public is because the RTG has not yet determined what it considers to be the safety standard for PM2.5 in Thailand.

Old Habits Die Hard...

16. (U) The main cause of seasonal air pollution in northern Thailand (as well as Burma and Laos) is agricultural burning, an outdated "slash and burn" method of preparing crop fields for the new rainy season (May-October). The bad habit is one that northern Thai farmers are reluctant to give up and that law enforcement agencies are unwilling to eradicate. One farmer in the Hang Dong district of Chiang Mai (where post's housing compound is located) said that he has about two acres of farm land, which he can burn and clear of its harvested rice husks in only ten minutes. He said, "If I don't burn, I have to rent a tractor and buy fuel." Although one government official in the Hang Dong district who specializes in agricultural issues said local authorities have tried to show that plowed plots of land

produce higher yields than burnt plots, farmers remain unwilling to take on the initial high costs of plowing on the chance of a higher crop yield.

17. (U) "There will not be any effort to stop burning and improve air quality until the public sector stops being flexible with farmers," said a representative of a local environmental group. She said that local government agencies, including ones in the Hang Dong district, have been uncooperative in joining environmental groups to denounce burning and enforce anti-burn laws. She said that government officials have brushed off her environmental groups' calls for action, arguing that burning is "a livelihood and traditional way of life of the local people."

18. (SBU) Although the Chiang Mai Governor chairs a committee to combat agricultural burning, government officials from the provincial to the municipal to the sub-district level remain flexible in allowing farmers to continue burning. During the burning season this year, no Thai authority in Chiang Mai made any public health warnings. Our contacts in the public and private sectors admitted that government agencies try to keep seasonal air pollution a low-profile issue out of fear that drawing attention to it would damage local tourism. (Note: Medical officials were uncharacteristically vocal about air pollution this year. See ref A.)

...And People Die from Old Habits

19. (U) The bad news of a dangerous burning season is coupled with recent news about poor health among northern Thais from a recent report issued by the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB). According to the NESDB, the "northern region" of Thailand was ranked highest in the country in terms of illness, with over 27% of the northern population falling ill during the year, though the report does not define what is considered "ill." Of those who reported an illness, 40% were reported as respiratory illness, a likely consequence of the seasonal air pollution.
MORROW